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McQuade may get bump in funding

The manmade harbor at McQuade Road on Duluth's North Shore is nearing completion and may soon have extra federal money to build restrooms and other amenities

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Just off Scenic Highway 61 at McQuade Road, two rocky arms gently stretch into Lake Superior and embrace the twinkling waters.

For longtime supporters of the controversial breakwalls, boat landing, docks, fishing piers and parking lot, that's a good sign. It means the McQuade Safe Harbor project -- which has been in the works for more than 20 years -- is nearly complete.

Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials said work should be complete by late September. Although that would meet the contractor's deadline, it's later than earlier estimates that boats could be in the water by August.

On Thursday, the 3.1-acre, roughly \$8 million project was on the verge of getting another \$1 million to complete Phase II, which could include such planned amenities as permanent restroom and fish-cleaning facilities, landscaping and picnic tables, said Les Ollila, regional manager for the DNR's Trails and Waterways Division.

"I think that's enough to finish it," Ollila said. "The construction (by Northland Constructors) is going really well. It looks like something, finally. We're all pretty pleased."

A provision by U.S. Sen. Mark Dayton, D-Minn., in the Water Resources Development Act, which passed the Senate on Thursday, raised the federal spending limit and paved the way for the Army Corps to contribute more toward the harbor's recreational aspects. The legislation will allow the federal government to contribute 50 percent of the total costs, said Bill Rito, project manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Detroit Region.

Without the provision, the Army Corps by law can only dedicate funds toward navigational uses, Rito said.

The measure, which also passed the House, has only to survive conference committee and be signed into law.

Meanwhile, work at McQuade is about 85 percent complete, said John Larson of the Army Corps of Engineers in Duluth.

The safe harbor should be open to the public next year, said Bill Beaudry of Duluth, chairman of the McQuade Public Access Committee.

"We are certainly looking forward to it," Beaudry said. "And it will be well-used. I'm certain of that."

The safe harbor has drawn public opposition because of the cost and environmental concerns. Critics also said the lake's fierce storms would sweep away the breakwalls.

The city of Duluth even pulled out of the project in 2000 after city councilors expressed concerns about Duluth's commitment to maintain the facility. Several years later, Duluth rejoined partners St. Louis County and Duluth and Lakewood townships.

Traffic once again hums along the highway, but now over new asphalt and a faux-stone bridge.

Once complete, McQuade's 825-foot-long east breakwall will feature a sidewalk and three concrete fishing piers atop giant gabbro stones. The launch will have two docks and two ramps but no space to tie up boats overnight.

McQuade is one in a series of safe harbors in the works along the North Shore. Other harbors are at Agate Bay in Two Harbors, Knife River, Grand Marais and Grand Portage.

The DNR and Army Corps already have completed harbors and marinas in Silver Bay and Taconite Bay.

Chet Bianco, chairman of the Harbor Advisory Committee in Two Harbors, said the DNR recently acquired property for the safe harbor. Although the design and archaeological work are under way, the city is seeking more than \$3 million in federal funding, he said.